What this research is about

Problem gambling (PG) is defined as repetitive gambling behaviour that leads to negative consequences. There are few studies investigating how common PG is among adults aged 55 and older. The prevalence of older adults who are reported to have PG varies across studies. One reason is because of the use of different measurements to assess PG.

Individuals with PG often have comorbid disorders. Comorbid disorders are conditions that occur at the same time as PG. Research suggests that older adults with PG tend to have comorbid alcohol and smoking addictions. They may also have mood and anxiety disorders. Older adults may have comorbid disorders before they develop PG. In this case, comorbid disorders increase the risk of PG. Older adults can also develop comorbid disorders after they have developed PG. Past research has found that older adults may gamble to escape from personal problems, such as loneliness and social isolation. Too much gambling can lead to PG.

The gambling industry promotes responsible gambling (RG) strategies to prevent PG. RG strategies can include leaving credit cards at home, not gambling alone, and setting limits on the amount of money or time spent on gambling. Few studies have investigated whether older adults use RG strategies and if RG strategies reduce their likelihood of PG. In this study, the researchers investigated which RG strategies are used by older adults living in Ontario, Canada. They also explored whether older adults who use RG strategies have lower risk of PG and if certain strategies are more effective than others.

What you need to know

This study examined the types of responsible gambling (RG) strategies older Ontario adults use, if using RG strategies lowers their risk of problem gambling (PG), and what RG strategies are most effective. The researchers combined data that had been collected from 673 older adults in three separate studies. The findings showed that few older adults were at risk of PG. Most older adults reported using RG strategies. The most common strategy was to limit the amount of money spent on gambling activities. The number of RG strategies that the older adults used was not related to their risk of PG. More research is needed to determine which, if any, RG strategies are better at protecting older adults from PG.

What the researchers did

The researchers combined data that had been collected from 673 older adults in three separate research studies. The first study collected data from 270 older adults who were from southwestern Ontario and spoke English. The second study collected data from 222 older adults who were from Northeastern Ontario and spoke English in 2005. The third study collected data from 181 francophone older adults living in Northeastern Ontario.

The researchers compared the demographics of the three groups. They compared the older adults’ risk of developing problem gambling (PG) by looking at their responses on two questionnaires. These questionnaires were the Windsor Screen and the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The Windsor
Screen is used to identify older adults who are at risk of developing PG. The PGSI identifies adults having no, low, or moderate risk of developing PG, or having PG. The researchers determined which RG strategies the older adults used by looking at the results from the Guelph Family Gambling Items questionnaire.

What the researchers found

Older adults in the three studies had some differences in terms of income and marital status. Older adults from southwestern Ontario had higher income than those from Northeastern Ontario. Francophone older adults were more likely to be married. There were also some differences across the three studies in terms of age. These differences were consistent with what had been reported before in census.

Few older adults were at risk of developing PG. Many older adults used more than one RG strategy. The most popular RG strategies were setting a spending limit, using self-control, and bringing a certain amount of cash. Older adults who had a high risk of developing PG were slightly more likely to leave their bank cards at home as an RG strategy. There was no relationship between the number of RG strategies that the older adults used and their risk of developing PG. Thus, older adults with lower risk did not use more RG strategies than older adults with higher risk.

How you can use this research

Researchers could use this research to further investigate which responsible gambling strategies older adults use and which strategies are better at protecting them from gambling problems. They could also investigate whether providing social support to older adults (e.g., by involving them in social events) could reduce older adults’ use of gambling to escape loneliness and social isolation.

About the researchers

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Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling policies, standards and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

Learn more about GREO by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.